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LEXANDER POPE, the eighteenth-century poet and wit, once wrote about being trapped in conversation with a crashing bore:

I whisper gracious God!
What sin of mine cou'd merit such a Rod?
That all the Shot of Dullness now must be
From this thy Blunderbus discharg'd on me!
The beauty of the metaphor is that dullness (the word boredom had not yet been coined) is represented as existing in its own right.

Boredom is not just an effect which people experience: it is an intrinsic quality. I am not speaking of the boredom experienced by, say, an adolescent denied access to cable television - that is a subjective experience resulting from immaturity - but of boredom which lies waiting to afflict anyone. There are certain books and documents which are, so to speak, booby-trapped: turning the page tugs a hidden string which pulls the trigger of the Blunderbuss of Boredom.

Joseph Conrad wrote of his paternal grandfather: “Retired to a little hereditary estate. Wrote a tragedy in five acts, verse, privately printed, and so dull that no-one was ever known to have read it through. I know I couldn’t, notwithstanding my family pride and the general piety of my disposition.” This describes a text suffering classic intrinsic boredom. In this case it was harmless enough as no-one, apart from the odd grandchild, had to read it.

But there are untold books and documents just as dull as Grandpa Conrad’s verse drama which are forced on people. Consider this clause from the federal government’s Superannuation Industry (Supervision) Regulations.

For the purposes of subregulation 5.02(3), a distribution of costs in relation to a fund is not fair and reasonable if, in respect of a period that is, in relation to the fund, a good investment period, the trustee of the fund applies administration costs (being administration costs that would, but for the member protection standards, be applied to erode the minimum benefits of members of the fund to whom the member protection standards apply) in a way that erodes the benefits (other than the minimum benefits) of those members.

No wonder those who work in the superannuation industry tend to look pale and listless. The effect on the soul of having to read and write this sort of thing is described in Armistead Maupin’s Tales of the City:

He had hated it ... hated every boring, nerve-grinding minute he had ever been Brian Hawkins, Attorney-at-Law. He had sublimated his hatred in the pursuit of causes - blacks, Native Americans, oil slicks - but the “old ennui”, as he had come to call it, proved as persistent and deep-rooted as the law itself.

He still cringed at the thought of the singing fluorescent bulb that had tormented him for hours on end in the grass-cloth-and-walnut conference room of his last law firm. That fixture came to symbolise all that was petty and poisonous about life - if you could call it that – in the Financial District.

There is a common belief that the documents which deal with dry but important subjects - tax, insurance, commercial contracts, town planning and the like - must needs be dull because they have to be precise, legally binding and unambiguous. This is nonsense. Of course, there are docu-
ments which are innately and irreversibly dry: the telephone book, the reinforced concrete code, the tax act, or anything which contains large amounts of detailed information. But no document should be any more boring than it has to be. Even a tax act can be well-constructed, clearly written, and presented in a manner which makes it comparatively easy for users to find the information they need, understand it when they do find it, and then get on with something more enjoyable. This could not be said of that clause from the superannuation regulations. Rather, it calls to mind the words of the wonderfully-named American judge Learned Hand, who said of the United States' Internal Revenue Code:

The words ... dance before my eyes in a meaningless procession: cross-reference to cross-reference, exception upon exception - couched in abstract terms that offer no handle to seize hold of - leave in my mind only a confused sense of some vitally important, but successfully concealed, purport, which it is my duty to extract, but which is within my power, if at all, only after the most inordinate expenditure of time.

The words "successfully concealed" are important: they imply intent, even malice, on the part of the person who drafted the document. This might be unfair, but it might not. Inflicting boredom on someone is, at root, an assertion of power, and there is no question that it is often done deliberately.

I RECENTLY APPLIED for a job with the Australian Tax Office. According to the advertisement, they wanted "talented communication professionals" who could "win friends and influence people" and were "particularly skilled in modern communication techniques". Not everyone's dream job, to be sure, but I was reasonably interested - until I received the selection criteria, a document of thirty-one pages. Here is a taste:

The Joint Selection Committee (JSC) has been set up under section 50DB of the Public Service Act. The JSC is a selection panel comprising a Convenor nominated by the MPRA, a nominee of the Department, the Australian Tax Office (ATO), and a nominee of the staff organisation, the Media, Entertainment and Arts Alliance (MEAA). The JSC will make a recommendation to the Delegate, ranking the most suitable officers in an order of merit, according to their relative efficiency ... Selection criteria are designed to help relate the factors in the definition of efficiency to the requirements of the particular positions being considered. They have been established with reference to the duties of the positions to be filled and to the concept of efficiency as defined in section 50A(2)(a) of the Public Service Act.

The Tax Office, I quickly realised, was not the place for me.

The bizarre thing about this document is that it goes to great and tedious lengths to make the selection process non-discriminatory; but it has the effect of discriminating against the very people they want for the job: "a talented communication professional" would run screaming from a job description like that one.

Equal opportunity provisions and merit protection processes, both honourable in intent, are easily subverted in the hands of those who have literally bored their way to the top. (An alternative definition of "to bore" is "to advance, push forward, by gradual persistent motion ... to persevere by slow and laborious means to the attainment of a distant object".) Reading about the intricate mechanisms involved in getting a job at the ATO reminded me of Charles Dickens' description of lawyers in *Bleak House*:

mistily engaged in one of the ten thousand stages of an endless cause, tripping one another up on slippery precedents, grooping knee-deep in technicalities, running their goat hair and horse hair warded heads against walls of words and making a pretence of equity with serious faces, as players might.

Organisations like the Tax Office have a rule - unwritten but of iron application - that those who apply for a job, for permission to do something, for funding, or for any other favour, shall do so using the same constipated style the organisation uses. An example, from a submission by a community group in Pennsylvania which wanted to establish a "safe house" program for children involved in prostitution:

It is an extremely doubtful and naive assumption that children independently execute physical and psychological resolutions which present themselves as commodity allotments within a business doctrine, therefore motivation of the individual is included to provide a workable justification development as related to the operation and pre-requisites of the "safe house" concept.

William Lutz, an American journalist (from whose book * Doublespeak* the passage comes) wrote: "You have to hope they got the money ... despite this prose."

Unfortunately, it would not be despite but because of the awful writing. A Victorian teacher told me recently that she wrote submissions for funding in the same sort of style: "You have to, otherwise you don't get the money."

The word *submission*, which the dictionary defines as "humility, meekness, acceptance of authority, obedient conduct or spirit", is entirely appropriate here. The grim pun is an illustration of the nexus between boredom and power, of how a powerful organisation asserts its authority over individuals by subjecting them to boredom, and by forcing them to be boring in turn.

The Communist Party raised the political use of boredom to a high art. Arthur Koestler, who travelled to
the Soviet Union in the early 1930s, described the "educational" lectures inflicted on workers:

The average political lecture in a Soviet factory lasted two to three hours – following upon a working day of eight hours or more. Whatever the actual subject of the lecture, it had to cover all the "theses" and slogans enumerated in Stalin's last speech or in the last Party resolution. To omit a single one – say, "the strengthening of the production-offensive for the over-fulfilment of the light metal industry's revised counter-plan", or the "intensification of the struggle for unmasking the German Social-Fascist traitors to the working class as allies of the Trotskyite agents of the Hitlerite bandits and the imperialist warmongers in general" – to omit, I say, a single one of these tongue-twisting ritual formulae would have laid the lecturer open to the accusation "that he deliberately neglected an important point of the Party program and has thereby become guilty of counter-revolutionary agitation" ... the deadly, infinitely involved Byzantine ritual had to be played out from the first letter to the last.

The example is admittedly extreme, but though no-one in Australia is shot for failing to jump through linguistic hoops, our organisations still use language to assert their power over individuals.

Most people who work in a large organisation, whether as a student at a university, a manager in a large company, or a public servant in a government department, have to read a great deal of boring material, and feel considerable pressure to write boring documents in turn. Sometimes it is because "that's what you need to do to pass the subject", sometimes "the managing director wants all letters on company letterhead in the same style": whatever the rationalisation, it amounts to forced boredom and is extremely difficult for the individual to resist.

This pressure is not restricted to conservative institutions, or to those which, like the Tax Office, deal with innately dry material. To the contrary, the humanities departments of universities are probably the worst offenders.

**There is NOT** the slightest excuse for any piece of writing related to literature (or any of the arts, or most of the other humanities) to be boring. The study of literature, for anyone intelligent and sympathetic, should be fun. After all, it is about art and exploring the human condition: what could be more innately interesting? Yet it is in this field that some of the dullest academic nonsense is to be found.

Erica Jong complains of this in her autobiographical novel *Fear of Flying*. The protagonist, Isadora Wing, is studying for a postgraduate degree in eighteenth-century literature:

Nobody seemed to give a shit about your reading *Tom Jones* as long as you could reel off the names of the various theories and who invented them. All the books of criticism had names like *The Rhetoric of Laughter*, or *The Comic Determinants of Henry Fielding's Fiction*, or *Aesthetic Implications in the Dialectic of Satire*. Fielding would have been rolling over in his grave. My response was to sleep through as much of it as possible.

She tries to explain her worries to her supervisor:

> You see, Professor Stanton, I started studying eighteenth-century English literature because I love satire, but I think I want to write satire not criticise it. Criticism doesn't seem very satisfying somehow.

> "Satisfying!" he exploded. I gulped.

> "What makes you think graduate school is supposed to be satisfying? Literature is *work*, not fun," he said.

> "Yes," I said meekly.

> "You come to graduate school because you love to read, because you love literature – well literature is *hard* work! It's not a game!" Professor Stanton seemed to have found his true subject.

What is it that drives the Professor Stantons of this world? It is partly that in tertiary institutions – indeed in almost any large organisation – people are most worried about being blamed for money going to frivolous or unworthy activities, activities which might be seen as fun. So a negative reality is created. If fun areas are suspect, *then the key to success is to make everything you do as difficult and boring as you can*.

There are other advantages to producing boring documents. In Bill Watterson's cartoon strip *Calvin and Hobbes*, Calvin, only six but wise beyond his years, expresses it well: "I used to hate writing assignments, but now I enjoy them. I realised that the purpose of writing is to inflate weak ideas, obscure poor reasoning, and inhibit clarity. With a little practice, writing can be an intimidating and impenetrable fog!"

A book Calvin might well admire is Stephanie Trigg's 1994 critical study *Gwen Harwood* (one of the Oxford Australian Writers series).

> "Women's writing" and the "woman writer" are problematic terms, as they imply a binary opposition between male and female which is increasingly coming under critique. In the context of such discussions, the use of vocabulary that assumes the stability of male or female identity may be deeply implicated in traditional hierarchies, if to speak in such terms implies too ready an acceptance of a hierarchy whereby "women's writing" is the Other to a more general writing ... Gwen Harwood consistently rejects identification as a woman poet ... Without seeking to judge her response to tradition against some putatively normal female
response, and without aiming to impose a category which might blind us to other aspects of her work, I still believe it might be instructive to set Harwood's poetry next to some of the critical issues raised by feminist theory. My readings will sometimes run contrary to the grain of the poems, and to Harwood's own statements; but far from fearing I do her an injustice, I regard this discussion as supplementing those thematic readings which focus on her representations of motherhood, for example, or which read the poetry as primarily expressive of the "real" attitudes of the woman, Gwen Harwood.

Further on, puzzling over some of Harwood's poems which are written in a masculine voice and are politically incorrect, Trigg writes: "In many of these poems, the less overt point seems to be one about the knowledge men claim of women, although the degree of irony in these voices is sometimes uncertain. Harwood rarely commits herself to the straightforward politics that many of her readers would desire." Trigg gives herself away here: the purpose of her book is to bully a warm, sensuous, romantic poet with a wonderful sense of humour into being a radical feminist, which she is not. The less overt point, I am tempted to say, seems to be one about the knowledge that critics claim of poets.

This is the use of boredom as an instrument of power. It is part of what Les Murray calls "the East German plastic bag ... pulled over our heads, stifling and wet". In the bag, along with much else, is "self-abasement studies and funding's addictive smelly rag".

But boredom as a weapon has major limitations. It is effective in the struggle for power within established institutions, places where, to quote Murray again, "humans can't leave and mustn't complain". But it cannot, in the words of the Tax Office "win friends and influence people". In seeking to preserve their power and importance, Professor Stanton, Stephanie Trigg and their ilk have bored and alienated thousands of people, including many of their own students.

Thomas De Quincey wrote that a person "has no unlimited privilege of boring one". The people charged with the care of literature in this country have exceeded this privilege. The result: the economic rationalists can slash and burn their way through humanities departments with little opposition. Having been blasted with the Shot of Dullness, the people who love literature are much less inclined now to argue that it is important, and worth paying for.

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